



Julia's Secret Notes

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I had never a horse.

I had never a kingdom.

I never had a bright idea.

I'll never reach the wisdom.

Someday, this thinking will be gone.

Someday, the sun will end up too.

And I'll never know of another beginning,

And 'I love' will be orphan of 'you'.

I

I was seventeen when my mother entered my room and said majestically: *Your father is dead.* We looked at each other emotionless, I barely suppressing a sigh of relief. I know, it isn't what it is usually expected to feel (and say) when someone from the family is passing out. Nevertheless, I take it as something that occurs on a daily basis in the world, and my intuitive assessment is probably based on my own experience and the real stories I heard or read.

I was questioning myself on issues such as empathy, sensibility, forgiveness. Was I a bad daughter? I had everything a girl of my age could dream about (except some showbiz icon we almost all, in a hysterical euphoria, are fretting upon). My family

had a good income. I didn't lack anything from the material side of life. My father called me always *Princess*, which wasn't exactly a sign of love, as it was one of a desire to expose in every way his higher social status. It could be asked: What is wrong to be proud of his/her place in society, the more when this is toward the top of the ladder? What right has a child to doubt the legitimacy of his parents social status pride or anything else regarding them? Obviously, for most of the mankind's past and present - none.

Others would ridicule the quandary on my own legitimacy to cast a critical eye on parental behavior. Some people on this planet had acquired the right (always is an issue of rights, righteousness and truth) to think over all kind of things, with no prejudice (with *sense & sensibility*, thank you Jane) and with a taste for a fresh state of mind. Yes, refreshing the mind is what a revolution of ideas always is, as my history teacher (secret college love fantasies are a fairy tale fog on this refreshment theory) used to emphasize as often as he could.

I had my darkest hour, with criminal thoughts, against him,

against me. I rebelled against all possible gods, then fell into depression, exhausted by fury and guilt. From that time on, all that went somehow wrong in my life I suspected to be a revengeful consequence of those sinful thoughts. Now and then I wondered if the remorse centered on the notion of sin was not mainly a cultural collective frame, a chain of another tradition aimed to preserve a social order. I was, despite my free spirit, a prisoner of history and a prisoner of my own conscience. I had to think of boundaries, without being able to completely free myself from the rope around my neck and around my judgments.

According to the common wisdom, daughters and fathers have a special relationship. I won't deny it as a general saying, and I'll assume that my relation to my father was one of the exceptions to the rule. It won't change the bitterness, even the hatred I'd piled up over the years. He always acted as if he knew better than everyone, rejecting all other opinions than his, or only pretending to accept them, beyond an arrogant smile. When my mother and me talked back, he became a red face and his voice turned thunderous. There were moments when he slapped us. The

following day he would behave as nothing had happened. He even made jokes, but the eyes had a warning glance, and the air was heavy with the killed flight in the family triangle.

Even in the what I would call peaceful moments, the air in our home was heavy with fear, as a sky divided between sun and dark clouds. It was fear, mixed with frustration and anger. 'Love' was the daily mantra of my father, underlying all the acts towards mom and me. It brings in my mind the patriotic propaganda, justifying all government's acts with the 'love of our country' - as in the heavens of the motherland, the same on the earth of the family, robotic hypocrisy. I won't say nothing about religions, the subject is too puzzling to me.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm not too harsh toward him. After all, no many people take critics serenely. I was exasperating my friend Jennie, complaining incessantly of my authoritarian father. *So what, mine is of the same bunch, I don't care much about his fits and starts. Just grab the money he gives to you and enjoy life!*

Jennie gave me comfort, tried to unglue me from the sticky dirt of life, made me laugh and blast away the blue mood. But she

was not so lighthearted as she wanted to seem. She grudged her father for cutting Oliver, her elder brother, from the entire family, because of his opened homosexuality. Mr. Calliveri set an example for the parish community how to handle such a terrible situation. He wore from that *cutting* moment the dignified face of a sacrificer and expected that wife and daughter will attend him in this dignified exceptionalism. Jennie was longing after his brother, whom he loved so deeply that once she swore she'll be a virgin till death. How ludicrous, grotesque it might sound, it was one of those many accidents in the best of all possible worlds, revealing in a turned on its head, abstruse way the purity of soul. Or was it simply a love story from another time, another world? I could write something trendy around it. Or maybe not - there are a lot of the kind in the literary and movie fields, and I don't want to increase the vastly rubbish in there.

Oliver never knew about her sister's oath. They kept being in touch through my cell phone, until Jennie left home with no words and for good, joining a voluntary mission overseas. Their parents are praying routinely for them. The dignity of

righteousness gathered a tinge of shame - oh no, not for their *cutting* love, they (Mrs. Calliveri was always the humble and proud shadow of her husband) are embarrassed over their mistaken children.

My father's stance (once more - family's 'breaking news' have a likeness to the general ones) over the Calliveri's children drama somehow confused me. He was supportive to Oliver and Jennie, tried to persuade Mr. Calliveri not to be so tough on them, displaying a liberalism hardly to match the authoritarianism at home. It seemed that his sympathy was genuine, and this made my bewilderment greater. I wonder how he would have felt and responded if her daughter had been gay. He already overreacted when I put on a miniskirt or I returned home from a birthday party after 11 PM. So, what to think about such a puzzled demeanor? It was a challenge I was running into almost every day. And speaking of a puzzle, it is appropriate to envision it as an abstract picture which you don't know how to understand, beginning with how to hang it on the wall. His righteousness was the non-religious matching to the righteousness of the Calliveris.

I found -again- in it a pattern present on a higher level, after learning about the 20th century history of the East Europe: a self-sufficient authoritarianism, beaming with the aura snatched from the exiled gods.

Jennie called me a paranoid. Her calling wasn't lost on me I realized that I had to leave off some -if not all- of my thoughts wrestling with the father-image. I needed to focus more on myself, on my future. After all, my parents provided me with the financial background necessary for a start in life. I was sorry for mom, but her submission to her husband was not unavoidable. She could have quit, I would have supported her (we had a few words on the issue), she had a string of short-lived rebellions, edging to hysteria - and that was all. A love of slave I would say, a relationship where strife was a sort of spice, and physical pleasure a sadomasochistic encapsulation of all their ups and downs.

Then, I realized that at some point I wouldn't have to see my father, erasing all traces of our insubstantial relation. The moment came earlier than expected. I didn't feel as an orphan, it was a

sense of freedom, of completeness. All my vital threads became fresh, entwined by exhilaration and tranquility. It was, nevertheless, a moment when the reality of death bore its strike on me, a chilly moment when I wondered what my own legacy will be.

Now, I am just in that point of life.

Why am I writing these lines? Do I feel accountable as people usually do when the end approaches? Do I want to leave something behind me? Is it vanity? I loathe it, still it might be a trick of fate.

Fate... I didn't consider it, until I made several experiences. They were quite exciting, one feels as singled out, then realizes there are so many other similar stories, and conscious of your foolishness you are not more willing to share these 'miracles'.

I prepared myself to be a 'man of science'. I was good in chemistry, won two editions of the International Olympiad, then I dropped, just when I received a coveted scholarship. All along was more my father's ambition, than my real interest. I was never

totally in. My real intellectual love was for ancient languages. My father died in a time when I was strongly making my point. Well, his passing out had nothing to do with our strife, but it was a welcomed stroke of fate for my professional future. My academic life was (I have to speak to the past, nostalgia these days is a bonus to the disease) a beautiful string of events.

I published translations, had classes with gifted students, became member of respected classical institutions. I drop the usual petty things that one has to go through at a job, as acid rain is dropping from leaves and they manage to survive.

On the whole I was content, although almost everyone else would find my intellectual interests boring, shallow, useless. This is the way we are: isles of innocent narcissism. If I question seriously the sense of my academic achievement, I might as well think it doesn't amount to much. There isn't a matter of the only few years I spent as a classical scholar, there is the meaning of what I did, the eternal questioning of the reason of life and of the way one lives. When I look up in a reference book and read biographies of 'illustrious' people, I get the uneasy feeling of

being witness of something meaningless, notwithstanding the 'rating' one gets in history.

Interesting - we are yet a society centered on itself, as if the Earth was in the middle of the universe, as people thought for so many centuries. The astronauts got very physical the ridicule of this conceit. The strong and the weak of our behavior lie in this 'center of everything' (mis)conception or simple vital instinct. Maybe this is the reason of the greater part of my decisions, or the impulse to write. Writing makes me more stable, even in a medical sense, keeps my thoughts and emotions in a relative order, reminding me of a ragged army under the command of an arduous general.

Writing, or painting, or music, or an intellectual game can be a therapy, according to what one likes. I know all that, I have read a lot about it, I needed for my thesis *Mind and Body in Ancient Greece*, and out of curiosity too. Now, it is my turn to look more closely on this relation, with the benefit of the familiarity of the present and the setback of the shaking insecurity of the future.

Maybe it is a bit from everything: calm down my nerves, building

a coherent landscape from my past, shyly giving in the possibility that these notes will be read by Romeo or someone else. Then, why not writing purposely for publishing? To let share others my trials with so dim an outcome. To add to the many comparable testimonies the *uniqueness* of my own. I'll be compassionated, some people will drop a couple of tears in their daily champagne-like luck, and then they will forget, erase the duplicate file of my misery from their memory, eventually recovering it to fill in a gap in some conversation, bringing pure, raw emotions in the routinely tittle-tattle. Some reviews on the Amazon.com would determine a literary diagnostic equally confusing as the medical one from my doctors.

Am I too cynical, just because I am frustrated, so *cutting* (that's why one can say *my heart is bleeding*) frustrated? Or... yes, I think I got it! All the scribbling here is only to screen me from the agonizing screaming and yelling inside my body, is only my rattling against the rattling of a mini, grotesque Armageddon between the *good* cells and the *evil* ones, until I become

unconscious, but not before my mind, with an extreme exertion, shouts like a movie director: *Cut! Cut!*

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Cut! Cut! Although I was under anesthesia, I could hear as from far away the voices of the doctors over me. Then, black out. Then, mix of a sort of dreaming and hospital buzz. Slowly, words, images gathered to recognizable patterns and apparently random thoughts wove through them. I tried to move, but I couldn't. Unlike in a nightmare, it was not so horrifying frustrating, I felt only a numbness, last echoes perhaps of the anesthesia. Still, it was more than that. The unresponsiveness of the body was immersed in a large sensation of warm, a feeling akin to the description of the death through freezing. It was, it is my winter time of life, sooner than I expected, with burgeoning trees stilled in their dance of fresh colors and smells. I'm not

complaining, I'm not yielding to self-pity. I am empathically aware of the legion of hardships and sufferings in the world. This would not prevent me to not wave away any feeling of pain, of presumed injustice and any desire to vent in some revengeful way my repressed anger. It isn't necessary a bad means, I learned from an article 'how to vent anger healthfully', Romeo tried to help me with an assortment of spiritual theories and practices, most of them I knew them well - all seem to me as hackneyed theories, wooden language. Oh, Romeo, it's only you, by yourself, who gives me solace and feeds my will. Say *I love you* again and again, and my winter will fade for these moments, the icy fear will melt, the smile will break out in freedom. Another love story, in the myriad of them. Just another, eligible to be picked up by a novelist or a screenwriter, with a chance to become popular and the author a (rich) celebrity. The frontier between sublime and trivial is, indeed, so thin. Either of the two sides are something to be conquered, with the difference between tender love and rape. But me, I'm not in front of the Rubicon, I tremble on the banks of Styx.

Should I burn these papers and stop to record whining sounding 'weather reports'? Because I wouldn't like it to be used someday in a gossip column or in a TV series. I should be more stoic and pragmatic - living every day with so little as possible care, enjoying, in the given circumstances, as much as I can the time I have with Romeo.

Easier said than done. Really, I'm desperate, and sometimes I believe that even Romeo doesn't understand my desperation. The agony of not knowing what to do, how to understand what is happening to me, not to know exactly who I am. *Who I am? Who am I?* These were Robert de Niro's lines in the comedy *Analyze This*, and every time I remember them I'm laughing tears. And I do it once more now, though it is a mix of laugh and cry, and on top of it the exasperation at the possibility to get me even an inch in a melodramatic mood.

Every day is getting worse. There are moments when it seems that something will change to the better, but is only an illusion. Maybe all life is an illusion - one of the common sense 'truths' of

philosophy. I am not a yogi, I feel so cruelly the pain - and if I would not feel it, would it be different? To go down (or up?) serene in death - a beautiful, inspirational image for literature and movies. For me - a cheap theatrical show, to cover at best, if not to redeem, the destitution of human life, the farce of 'the best of all possible worlds'. I am positive that a lot of other people in need or even without seemingly any reason to feel bad are in the same mood as me. I want answers, I am not like the 'Olympian' Goethe, who denied himself, for the sake of his own peace of mind, the question *Why?* ('never say why', as a match for 'never say sorry'). I can't be 'serene' like the animal in the herd going to the slaughterhouse and having no clue why this is happening. I can't be content with the old line trotted by 'wise' men: 'Silence is gold'. I won't be silent. I want to make my case, I'll scream it, I'm not to be shut up by a police body of common sense and 'spirituality', I want some sort of justice, I don't want to hear any of the shallow words aimed to 'support' me, to convince me of the 'beauty of the afterlife' or propping me in my 'heroic' fight with the disease. The play card of 'heroism' was the jolly joker of all

sorts of authoritarian rules, from family to governs 'heroism' was the envelope of machismo surrounding all sort of deficiencies. How thankful I am to have Romeo on my side, a magical sword fighting my own exhausting wars, in an attempt to prevent a too explosive clash between me and the world as it is. Sometimes, even he's falling in the paths I distrust, despise. But him I understand, he has his own trials. I wonder how much his patience can be stretched. I realize that the person who take care of a sick one has a tough time too, physically, if not always in his/her heart. One day I said to him that it is ok with me if he wants to have sex with another woman. I can hardly do it and the future is bleak. He is young and - well, I wouldn't say he's a man and men have more sexual appetite, it is one of those shameless excuses for their infidelity. The only condition is to keep it secret from me, it is enough that he has my leave. So, I play into the hands of those who, caught cheating by their partner, are usually saying: *It's not what it seems*, because my 'generosity' is partially founded on the assumption that Romeo won't be in love with another woman (at least as I am alive). Trust is the firm ground of

our relation, we are each other's best friend, and even the doctors noticed it, building their optimistic guesses mainly on our love.

I yearn for him, I roll back in my mind sensual memories, I shiver hot and cold when his hand caress my cheeks after wiping the feverish sweat from my forehead, I want him badly, squeezing each other and become an entangled one body, incandescent and throbbing under the coolness of some mountain falls or, domestically, under the shower. All this is no more possible, and once more I hate me for lamenting over 'the good times', I hate the brave faces we have to make in front of the other, as if nothing has changed, I hate the mirror telling me daily the truth of my physical decay, I hate the snaking doubt over the pleasure Romeo could find in looking at me, I hate my hatred.

I am so, so tired. It is a mild day. He'll be back home in an hour or two. I'll ask him to gently climb on me and hold me tight (as tight as I can stand) - a bursting with life ivy on a crumbling house.

I have read the notes I made so far. If I would to comment them, it would be a sort of a duplicate, with minor changes. I am going nowhere, but I'm still going to write, between two crises and the scheduled pills.

The last lines from yesterday, with the 'climbing' and 'hugging', reminded me of the scene from Erich Segal's *Love Story*, the movie scene more vivid than the written one. I wonder if my imagery was not driven from subconscious and as such revealing itself as a form of aestheticizing my own condition. Am I displaying, giving barely a notice, a theatrical grief? Am I just decorating a Dickensian Christmas tree? Are all my jotted down

thoughts reshaping the genuine tears in narcissistic objects of art?

Am I playing a comedy of my sorrows? If this could be legitimate as a therapy, how much would this alter the naked truth about my self?

Calm down, girl, calm down! If it was published as a fiction book and I were one reader of it, I would have thrown it and never took again. One reason I read novels so infrequently is the back and forth with the same situations and ideas you already know from a pile of other books, some of them religiously framed in a 'literary canon'. Not only repetition annoys me, but the huge bulk of words, the flooding wording - *Parole, parole, soltanto parole*. Me, at least, I'm hammering the old refrains only on my head, enough to get a headache supplement and a torment of the conscience.

To write was supposed (given, more unconsciously than premeditated) to do me some good. I should stop bother about the *context*, and pay attention only to the *text*, accepting, as a matter of fact, in a Penelope-like manner, the alternate doing and undoing of it, faithful to the word that comes back to me after

every couple days of hectic crisis - *love*.

Thinking more about Segal's *Love Story*, I find that maybe it is some justice in what happens to me and Romeo, as lovers. I was curious to see what has become of the protagonists of the movie. I had in mind their fresh, beautiful faces, they were icons of pure, passionate love. This image is now ruined, after I searched the Internet. One may be fully aware of the ageing process, but the confrontation with the changes is always more or less painful. Nevertheless, there are good news for me, precisely from the bad news quarter: dying young, the memory of our love, even for an old Romeo, will always carry along our portraits as young lovers, by death eternalized youth. The winter of my discontent will be gone, and I, our love will be an immortal, distant spring. If this is only wishful thinking, an echo of the *deus ex machina* of the fairy tales, let it be - it would be one of the fairy tales that will help me with a good night's sleep. *Let it be, let it be.*

5

My first dream I remember is one about a fairy tale. There was a house somewhere near the woods, occupied by several friendly (Disney-like) animals who took me in. I see me walking toward the house and then climbing the steps. That's all. Perhaps there was a reminiscence of the Ukrainian folktale *The Mitten*, where seven wild animals found for a while shelter in the lost mitten of an old man. I always liked the story, it gave me a homey feeling, and the winter setting had the magic of Christmas.

Hence, I guess, the mighty tendency for idealism, which misguided more than helped me. Its singular exhibition was the

crush I had on Romeo. And the love he lavished on me was the sweet revenge of my dreamy side over the cynicism learned on a daily basis.

According to the irritating habit to check on everything it comes to my mind, I constantly suspected me of an awkwardly dissimulated kitsch, as an obvious proof of my laughable idealism. It is strange to observe how people are crying watching soap operas and at the same time how they are usually distrusting the happy end in the real life. I was one of them till I met Romeo, and apparently I am on the path to join them back, as the 'happy end' is about to split, having no distinct clue how to bring the 'happy' and the 'end' together. After all, happiness is not always a staple for melodramas, tragedy is drawing out stronger emotions. What am I saying! Am I, are we, me and Romeo, part of a melodrama, of a telenovela? It is like saying that we are living according to a screenplay, and here we are, back to *the fate*, back to the ancient Greek drama.

I suppose that my mind is inventing all sorts of stories, shots of a self defensive mechanism, searching for the best answer to the

major crisis of a terminal disease. The salient ingredient of them is, unsurprisingly from the point of view of the self-preservation instinct, the unknown, the unpredictable factor, *the miracle*. That's the crux of a *fairy* tale.

I used to think, in spite of my skepticism, that Romeo was my miracle. In a world where men have the upper hand, where many women are willing to fall in the submissive, ready-to-use-object role 'traditionally' prescribed to them, in a world where marriage is a prison, or a boring routine, or is despised, I call me a lucky woman having a husband like my Romeo. All of the dire things just mentioned considered, how could I miss the proper name for what happened to me - a miracle?

A fairy tale gone wrong, the magic is cut, we have to wake up to the modern times we live (or, allegedly more accurately, postmodern, which means modern-with-a-twist, like the cartoon I found in a magazine, showing Snow White raped by the dwarfs...). Still, I feel lucky and slowly dawns on me that I need to think less in terms of 'deserving'. I have, instead, to draw on the happiness to share our hearts. Yet, I can't forget the cracks

on this golden dream, the darkness creeping closer and closer.

How true the saying: *One eye smiling, the other eye crying.*

So, I got the Prince Charming. Lucky me, because I never thought to be married otherwise than to a 'prince'. My story is simple, has not the ingredients of the chick lit genre. I like to think of our love story as of something exclusive, but there were and are many other narratives not too different. In my case is kind of a revenge. Back in college I was the 'Cinderella' girl. Decidedly, I was not a joiner, and that set me apart. Romeo was in the same league (the paradox of the not joining thing), although he was popular with almost everyone. He has a charm (the fairy tale character is not a supernatural one, and that's the odds with the 'real' happy end stories being so uncommon and people goggling to romantic movies). I would say he has a charisma, in spite of his then and now scornful remarks, or maybe it's just that it does the zest.

We were two engaged solitudes, after bumping into each other on the ice skating rink. It was love at first sight. Both of us wanted to blame the other one for the accident. But when we made eye

contact we were speechless for a moment, then smiled. He helped me on my feet and asked if I was ok. He praised my profile and my eyes, asking me to have a photo session. I learned he was a renowned photographer, who worked with leading magazines and Associated Press. One of my photos made the cover of an exhibition flyer - *Anonymous Beauties From NY*. This was kind of a public love declaration. Romeo wanted to stamp my portrait over the image of the city, crossing the ridicule line as usually do the enthusiastic lovers. I was a bit embarrassed, and innerly glowing with joy. The 'Cinderella' girl was picked up by the 'Prince Charming' and all New York had to hear the news.

When we remember our first weeks together we feel the time rolling back and all that moments are revived by our memories in a mental panorama and in a physical rejuvenation. Our reminiscences reshuffled, the playfulness of love is starting over and over, and we get the impression that we are beyond time, winning a millenary bet - *eternal youth, eternal life*.

Really?

Someone called us derisively *the kitschy shaky speary couple*, apparently fed up with our *perfect* love and alluding to our names. We, for ourselves, did not pay much attention to the resemblance. We were too proud and self-conscious of our love to think of literary models or contemporary couples who made the front page of the tabloids. But we had the feeling that we were *in the family*. We were in the *Eros elite*, that happy, implausible mix of platonic and fleshy amour. The most striking example of it was the photo session we made with me naked, in a burlesque setting remembering the Antiquity and the subsequent down the centuries art mimicry. It was partly fun, partly ingenuity, partly makeshift kitschy prelude for sex. We were not interested in the photos, it was the cinematographic recording in our minds of the session, the final sex scene included, which we enjoyed.

Romeo said that he loved my body with the passion of an art collector and he could just extend to many of the art work representing women the words of Brancusi about Michelangelo's statuary: they are beefsteak. He raised me aesthetically above

those chefs d'oeuvre and baptized the photo session *À la recherche de la beauté perdue*. Asked what edible my body suggested, he smiled, smacked the lips and said in a low, hoarse voice: *Not in the dictionary*.

6

These days I realized that I have no more interest in Greek and Latin, in ancient studies in general. I hardly can say that I have any other interest left. Understandably, with all the physical pain, the therapy and the dim outlook. I find myself increasingly estranged from what used to be one of my reasons of life, the other one being Romeo. Putting the blame on the illness and on the indefinitely leave from the academic life doesn't stop me to be baffled by the numbness toward my old passion. I wonder if it was a real passion. Why had I to stay hours in a library, studying the cadaverous manuscripts and occasionally indigestible scholarly articles? What had me driven into pondering over one

letter missing from some word in a Hellenistic inscription in Syria, a word and its textual and historical environment being of no importance to the people of present Syria? I do not question the role of cultural heritage in building individual and collective identities, I am doubtful about the ability to use it in a reasonable and creative way. Sensationalism, backed up by an awkwardly concealed vanity, is the common mark of our thinking, even when we profess circumspection. What else is my bookish work, with all the praise it got, mentioned not only in the academic circles, but on several tv channels too, when set against the daily needs around the planet, the unrelenting wars and other horrors? I sound pathetic, but just now I demand a firm ground for my being a member of the community, and I find me wavering, I'm not able to be content of me as a social being. It's not exactly an existentialist crisis, it is one about agency. I am what I'm doing. Hence, what did I? Even if I were the single author of a ten of thousands pages encyclopedia, I'd have felt unaccomplished, futile.

Wait! Why should I care so much about 'community'? I always

have been a recluse, my real, social world is Romeo, I am fully alive because of his love. Not that I am insensitive to the life around me, but I'm not Mother Theresa, nor Princess Diana. If this exclusive affection is a sin, I am prepared to pay for it and, what the hell, maybe I'll become a new character in a revised Dante's *Divine Comedy*!

For the moment, I'm a confused character in my own - for my private use - storytelling. I used to be a well-rounded personality. Without notice, the golden bowl turned out cracked, chipped, a pile of conflicting memories edged by the freshness of wounds. Every day I take pains to mend it into a whole, a scarred beauty, like an old diva. Till morning, it is gone again into pieces. I'm able to see 'the original' only when I look in Romeo's eyes - love, the magic mirror of my life.

Still, I can't rid myself from the uneasy feeling of a wrong taken direction, of a void getting closer and closer to the firm hug of our souls, a tsunami marshalling towards *Las Islas de la Felicidad*. I'm trying to keep a cool judgment, going on the steady path of logic, leading me to trace all the trouble to my

obsession with the Absolute. I constantly searched for strong motivations, something that is not easy done by a cross-examination. It looks as if I never succeeded, with one exception - Romeo. A rock in a sea of chaos.

I had a strange dream. Old Granny was cuddling me, caressing my head, and kept repeating in a soothing voice: *Don't cry sweetie, don't cry.*

Old Granny was eighty one when she died. I had a special bond with my great-grandmother. I am, physically speaking, as good as a copy of her. Everyone who saw us together was astonished by the resemblance. We might have been included in a genetics research project. Not only for the look-alike, but also for our personalities. We were kind of twins across generations. While people marvelled at us, we paid little attention to the fact, being just happy with it and even slightly amused by the 'miracle'

impression we made.

Old Granny was my guardian angel (I wish she could have been forever), especially in my childhood. I used to spend the summer holidays at her home, with the beautiful garden behind it, on a gradually raising hilly ground. There were all sorts of fruit trees and along the alleys between them delightful flowerbeds. They all are the map of the happy moments of my childhood, the web of joyful colors and enchanted perfumes swinging my childish dreams. Moonshine, the Cesky Terrier of Old Granny, was the loyal companion in all my wanderings confined to the spellbound garden. The fairy tales read loud in the evening had a substantial, tangible correspondent in the world under the Old Granny's sway. Moonshine was, of course, a 'speaking dog' from the kingdom of fairy folk. The place was a refuge from the heavy atmosphere at my parents' home. Thanks to Old Granny the real world was worth to live in. The vivid memories from those holidays are an endless supply of peace and joy. We usually ate on the veranda. Old Granny was a consummate cook, making of me a foodie. It is a shame that we did not put her recipes in a book or on the web.

It would have been a more useful and more read book than my scholarly ones. Here I am again, nagging at my past decisions, not sure how right I was. I had possibilities (of course, I couldn't change my birth date or my parents, I'm ready to accept it labeled as fate), and I was in the position to play 'God', in order to yield 'the best of all possible worlds'. The idea of passing the best chances you had as a free man is weighing heavier on my heart than the almost total lack of decision power. Back then, I was safe from such tribulations, the Old Granny's land being the promised land I ingenuously was thinking it would be mine for all my life. There, all was natural, I was putting my mind at ease, thoughts were clear, mirroring the shafts of light on the background of the symphonic buzz and flutter.

Old Granny didn't spoil me. She knew how to discipline a child without yelling, slapping and tormenting lectures. She set a personal example, and didn't draw absurd rules or ones which she didn't herself observe. I wouldn't say she was a great educator, she shunned to play or stay with other children, but she was fond of me in an apparently distant manner and always knew how to

handle me, commanding an uncomelled respect. She didn't push me to anything, but I always did what she was requesting or advising. She listened to all I had to question, complain or fantasize. This was a quality I took care to make my own in the workshops with my students. It was exactly what I couldn't have at the *asylum*, as I got used to name the house where I spent the rest time of the year. Old Granny exchanged little words with my father and a few more with mom, who embittered her by the dropped guards before her husband and her willingly 'brain washing'. Father was paying to her a grudgingly respect and avoided as much as possible meeting her and most of all to sit at the same table. She was the sole person who made him uncomfortable and with whom he did not dare to try his usual I-am-better-than-you-are acting. This is probably a reason why he didn't quite like me, in spite of his boastfully loving-father show. He once tempted to oppose the 'traditional' arrangements for the summer break. As it happens with traditions -they die hard, if ever, that summer I went again to Old Granny, after she came after me and the only thing she said was: *Are you ready, my*

dear? Then, let's go. She looked sometimes as a coolheaded general and later, in the history class, I merrily imagined her as a she-George Washington. I never confessed to her this indirect eulogy, because she resented praise and, independent of it, loathed to be compared to men. I had one more reason, the most powerful one, that kept me quiet: military stuff would have reminded her about her husband.

He was always in the background of her mind, but I was careful not to reopen the wound. She was only eighteen when she married the nine years older Piero Negroponte, a government clerk, the two of them being over heels in love with each other. I was looking recently in the photo album Old Granny let me only once to glance when she was alive, and couldn't stop to smile at their wedding photos. They were so young and beautiful and beaming with happiness! I had under my eyes that moment, I even gripped in my hands that scrap of time, it seemed that whenever I look to it the time travel is not only a sci-fi indulgence. One evening I showed Romeo the album and told him the story of Piero and Luigia. After I finished, he wrapped an

arm around my shoulders and said with a faraway voice: It's like looking in a mirror...

Their families weren't so happy as they were, they crossed the 'reasonable' plans of marriage where love is not a must. Piero proved not to be a mama's boy and stood firm by his decision. His salary gave him basic independence and the passion of love the courage to sever the ties, if necessary, with his own family. Eventually, the two camps gave in, in fear that their already 'stained honor' would become a subject of scandal in the neighborhood.

When their daughter was four years old, Piero had to go on the North African front. In February 1941 his wife became a widow - Piero had been killed in the battle of Beda Fomm. As a matter of fact, he had been crashed under the tracks of a tank after a bullet had laid him on the field. His remains never made the road back to Italy. He is forever exiled in the African soil. The fate of Piero, along with all his fallen comrades in North Africa, was something to be proud of, because their 'heroism' matched the valiance of the legionaries from Ancient Rome. It was Mussolini's folly to

revive the 'glory' of the 'universal empire'. His clownery (emulated by a later Lybian dictator, with an equal miserably ending) and the operetta ideology of his loony pack plunged Italy in a tragedy in which my great grandfather was another statistical number.

Piero and Luigia were not political affiliated, they escaped the common delusion of the political demagoguery. But they couldn't prevent the monstrous consequences of it to reach them: the black river swallowed their idyllic cottage -love was their home-, whatever hard they had tried to stay as far as they could from the grimy, stinking flow. This was for me the first and paramount history lesson, and all history classes I attended I filtered through the lenses of that family record. The sadness that engulfed me once I could see my last road station is met by sadness inoculated by the fact that human evils are stubbornly rooted, persistent and bloating like weeds. If humans are the children of Mother Earth, then she was pregnant with fear, hatred, violence, insanity - love came last, and least. This is the world I am to leave soon. Even if I was the age Old Granny died, I couldn't be happy just because I

break up from this 'valley of sorrows'. I am grieved, not so much by my death as an inescapable event, but by the dead ends of our species as a 'civilization', nailing us in a sadomasochistic crucifixion. Reaching the 'Absolute', becoming a 'savior' seems to have been a foggy purpose of my life. It is a streak of idealism hardly to get rid of, a probable indication of the goodness inside me, something that many of us feel like a push to do the 'right thing'. It is just a feeling, beyond any ideology. The systemization of this instinct is an after, is the proof of entering the sinuous, odd alley of civilization. A summary look into the various creeds proclaiming the true and just way of life or into the wonder solutions made me skeptical. I resolved to keep a cool head when it comes to 'revolutionary' intentions, blueprints and movements. It is no need that I join the cohorts of 'saviors' or 'charismatics'. Nevertheless, now and then a warm tide of pressing commitment to change the world I live in in a better one is flushing through all my being. The tragic love story of my great grandparents might be one of its sources.

Luigia never married again. Never did she speak about Piero. I was the only one whom she entrusted her cherished memories, handing down the parchment of their love story, lively scrolling over the death.

She never said to me how much the death of Piero weighed in her decision to emigrate. I am at one end of the chain of events originated by one of those innumerable dramas that were sublimed, revenged by the power of art in characters who are carrying with them all the anonymous, untold histories. Yet, I don't know if I carry more than I think I do from the script of Old Granny's life...

'Script'? I have written the word without thinking. It was spontaneous. Might be it in the category of 'dictation'? I wasn't really convinced of this theory of writer's inspiration. I paid more attention to it when I was interested in chemistry and scientific discoveries. I found (nothing new, after all) that behind or along with the analytical thinking the intuition and, connected to it, some sort of revelation are present in the history of science.

Extended to all our knowledge process, the 'dictation' theory might fit in. Of course, this rises more questions and land the scrutiny on the border between religion and secularism. I've denied myself the thrill of being a ground reporter on this battlefield, to say nothing of the direct involvement in the debate.

My observations made more sense in the environment of classical culture, although I wasn't an enthusiast (curious, interested, empathic - yes; enthusiasm I reserved exclusively for my love to Romeo). So, I am not totally opposed to the idea of fate and this might be an explanation for writing about a 'script' of Old Granny's life. It doesn't mean that I'm more comfortable with my lot, on the contrary, it makes me angry, especially when it relates to 'karma'. I am, how to put it, hungry for an impersonal reason of life, something that makes sense for me, and I'm not willing to be the plaything neither for the 'great games' of history, neither for the ones of the universe/'gods'. I'm not a rebel, I am a freedom addict, and as one of this type I prize dignity as a stamp on my birth certificate.

After the dream, I put Old Granny's photo on the inside cover of the notebook. Everytime I look at it, the words from that night whisper in my head and a shiver of springtime runs through my wintered body: *Don't cry sweetie, don't cry.*

I spend more and more time in bed. To go to the toilet is a challenge, a short walk in the park is exhausting. All the people around me cheer me up for every such performance, something that you normally receive after climbing the Everest. I understand their support, but at the same time I don't miss the grotesque. I am irritated to be treated as a serious ill person, the care I receive, necessary and well intended, reminds me more acutely of my out-of-service body and dead-walking social status. It is a vicious circle - I need help, and I'd gladly shake it off. It is how sick people grow morose, getting crazy the ones who care for them. I never had a fight with Romeo, there were the usual pros and cons

exchanges on a string of issues, from buying a house item to the review of a book, but now I frequently snap at him out of the blue, then becoming hysterical just because of it. It breaks my heart to see him wearing out from my shift of personality, added to the rest of the sickness circumstances. He doesn't show it through changing his general attitude toward me, only his eyes have moments when they are expressionless, their beautiful deep black color looking as a black hole. Previously I enjoyed his eyes as an enchanted entrance to the land of bliss, now there are these moments when their black give me the shudders of the land of the dead.

Apparently, our love has not changed. Perhaps we are more than ever passionately bound, with the difference that we show it explicitly less. Romeo's love turns into a form of deep and, bitter irony, sickening compassion. We are both conscious of it and are trying to keep thoughts and moods in control, with the mixed result of steering a ship through a prolonged gale, knowing very well that there is not completely up to us to emerge safe and sound.

Last night we watched together an old comedy with the French actor Louis de Funès. The plot was weak, but the mimicry of Funès was brilliant. We felt the merriment of past years, forgot for about two hours our present predicament. Life was again self sufficient, an area without visible limits, you learned of them from rumors, and if you had to take in earnest notice of them, the Achilles and the tortoise fable would assure you that you'll never reach the limit of your life.

Serenity took possession of me, not leaving, to my bafflement, in the morning. Humor and sophistic logic saved the day, literally one day. Could I preserve this state of mind more than one day? Humor (especially black humor is cozily at my home, isn't it?) is the celebrated companion from the light (bright, at its best) side of life. Should I be careful not to neglect the most, as recorded by history, trustful companion in distress - religion? Laughing, after all, is associated with frivolity. We are not told of a laughing, not even smiling, Jesus. The recommended Christian joy is moderate and related to another, superior, order of things. You don't have to

mind at the hardships of this world, someone knows what is better for you and is taking care of you. You have to believe and be patient. Someone up there loves you... Well, it is more than enough for me that someone down here loves me. Philosophy and religion might be a source of inspiration and comfort, but the long ways of elaboration they take and the dogmatic frame aren't palatable to me. The bottom line is the tragedy to be a mortal. The immortality would be a tragedy too, as long as the youth is gone and a general routine will make you numb. Numbness is what I'm feeling now, in this whirlpool of thoughts, and a nausea follows, and is not only from the tumor spreading inside me. I am in a long row, nobody excepted, on the death row, with a life sentence. When we are born, the sand-glass starts to countdown, grain by grain. You can't see it, so you don't know what your time is. There are exceptions, I'm pretty entitled for one, making the rule more gruesome. There are exceptions to the exceptions too - the sacrificial joy of people blowing themselves for some 'sacred' cause, or the mass suicide of some 'enlightened' sect. Usually, countdown is associated with some exhilarating event: New Year

Eve, for example, or any other moment heralding a ‘refreshment’, a new ‘path’ or ‘level’. The supreme countdown, the suspense due to the secret of number you drew before entering this world are rarely present with us. If it would be the case, perhaps mental illnesses statistics would be different. The image of us all on a death row questions once again the sense of human life and of the entire life. A sense is more doubtful when other, by ourselves set up death rows are framed in the general one: the abuses, individual or collective, leading, sooner or later, to death - the local/’subjective’ slaughterhouse inside the cosmic/’objective’ one.

People made wonderful stories and images about redemption, about the power of love, about the inspirational relation with nature. One can agree with Eugène Ionesco that the world is a miracle with oases of evil, or say with Kertész Imre, the survivor of Nazi and Stalinist camps, that the good, not the evil can’t be explained. The instinct of survival will always provide hope, even in suicide. But ultimately nothing can change the raw fact of us being on the death row. It is the dead point in a conscience when

only faith can move you on, absurd vs. absurd (*credo, quia absurdum*), or defiant indifference toward pantragedy (*carpe diem*).

Neither of them 'moves' me 'on'. I stay here, in this muddle of commonplaces, chewing at them as any other from our 'blessed'/'cursed' herd did or does.

I'll switch on the TV, to have some fun, they are airing again *the Bundys*.

9

The last holiday we had (there are three years now) is my favorite. It was the year of my 'Bing-Bang'. A new universe came to life in my body, expanding at the expense of the old, 'legitimate' one. The dualist representation is something I can accept easier than one of a self destructing body.

I suspended all academic activities. Romeo made place in his schedule for an extended vacation. There was near Christmas, winter had gripped America with all its power. Romeo surprised me with tickets for Tenerife. A month to forget about cold and snow. A Christmas under the palm tree. Unfortunately, I had not the medical permission to lay in the sun. But I could use in the

early hours a large umbrella on the beach. I bought a couple of nice hats, a lavender bow straw and a cream Scala St.Tropez. I like to remember clothes items I used to wear before to be stuck in pajamas. I make inventories, I try to draw a chronology, compare wardrobes from different periods, how much they were in touch with fashion. Most of all, I enjoy to remember the details of shopping them - what the weather was, if I was alone or I had company, the place and the price, how I agonized sometimes until I was able to decide what to buy. It is kind of 'Julia reloaded', I play with my own stored in my memory 'clips', with the childish enthralment I had playing with my Barbie.

Romeo wasn't happy at first with the long shopping sessions. Little by little his interest was caught up (how could it not, with an aesthete like him?), and not only was he ready to keep me company, but got a liking to shopping spree. It seemed that we just fit the pattern of consumerism. Maybe we did. All I can say in our 'defense' is that we took pleasure in the colorful and playful appearances of life, with no great difference from the joy expressed by the 'primitives' in dealing with their outfit and

tattoos. It was a pleasure interwoven with the greater one of being together, of going hand in hand the alleys of life: the glittering facets of a crystal and its geometry.

We had all the time on our hands, although we were already concerned about my handful of time. Strolling, watching the sunrise and the sunset over the ocean, tasting the local meals and drinks, sex (the last unchecked season), roaming the markets, taking loads of photos, reading light literature and a mixed range of magazines - there was a feast of liberty, a luxury of non commitment. It could be also labeled 'a waste of time'. Depends on how one thinks. I was for sure not in the position to waste my time, not even a second I could afford to let it simply pass, I treasured every one of them. I remembered that nasty question - If you knew you'll die tomorrow, what would you do today? I never knew how to answer and the ultimatum character of the question irritated me. Now, I was in a real situation, albeit my end wasn't yet imminent and I didn't know when my final tomorrow is set. I could have plunged me in a frenetic scholarly project,

something that could make people to remember me not only as a notable humanist, but also as an intellectual hero, a matching character for the classical, ancient ones whom I have studied. It comes out that I'm not at that 'classical' level, I'm an epigone, a classic (!) example of 'decadence'.

It was there, in Tenerife, that we chatted, for the first and last time, about the chances I had to survive. Being so relaxed made it possible to discuss the otherwise 'taboo' subject as if we were speaking about someone else. It looked more as an exercise of imagination, the potential developments of a screenplay. The distance displaced the time, disconnected time from space, and we looked to my/our life as to a developed photographic film. A vision that recalled the idea of destiny and clairvoyance. It was all already there, in an indefinite (not too large) amount of possibilities. We had to trust in the divine choice: either outcome will be the best of all possibilities, no matter how we felt and judged it. At this point of fabulizing, both of us kept a minute of silence, then looked straight in each other eyes and burst into

laughter. We were more amused by, than sarcastic toward a dogmatized *déjà vu*. A shadow of sadness rang in our guffaw, knowing that our defiance might be the justified target for the same kind of laugh (or worst). The uncertainty was the source for both confidence and fear. Youth and love, in the settings of Tenerife, inclined the balanced to the former.

One evening, laying side by side in bed, while pondering how to spend the rest of the day, I watched him intensely and said (although I didn't intend to): *I know how you'll look when you'll be old*. He was startled and mumbled something about the nonsense to imagine how we'll look in the future. I stopped there, knowing that he read my mind. I cursed myself for the slip, it wasn't necessary to add more to the background of sadness in our picture. We were in a sort of paradise island, the landscape engulfed in light and vivid colors had adopted us, we were framed, and so conveying an exhilarating feeling of safety, in that idyllic picture. But inside us nagged a muffled danger, and we were like young antelopes frightened by a confused sense of

impending peril darting through the air from a hidden predator. I was in search of my lost time. Not the past, the future I wanted -and still I want- to secure to my memory. An attempt to stole the secret frames from the photographic film of my life, enabling me to pry in the cut-off part of my destiny (because I still do not give up the idea of unfairness, if we are all part of a scenario, and even in a haphazard universe unfairness would be a valid charge against, as long beautiful love stories are possible).

In our daily walks we met interesting people, eyed pretty souvenirs, came across enjoyable events (what a ridiculous, school like sentence - but the details have melted in a standardized recipe of felicity; there are books I read and movies I watched, and I don't, or very vaguely, remember plot and characters; nevertheless, their effect isn't lost on me, they remolded me, I became *the detail* of their spirit). All of that added to the colorful, lively, almost carnivalesque moving picture. No shoal of dead fish stranded on the beach to remind us of the Apocalypse. The general *dolce far niente* was a safe asset.

One day, going to one of the usual fairs, our attention was caught by two tables exposing lovely handmade ceramic flowery jewelry. The sellers, two young women, smiling and friendly, were from Bulgaria (or Romania, I don't remember exactly, they spoke a lot about the both countries). They had come there for two months to test the market and, like us, to escape from winter hardships. The outcome wasn't as they had expected, the English tourists were them especially irksome, taking their time to fumble through the items and, before leaving without buying, invariably dropping the charmed comment: *They are so nice, darling, aren't they?* Kings Day was a last chance for hitting the jackpot, but overall Daria and Ana (I'm glad to find that I didn't forget their names) were happy with their Tenerifan experience. The funniest thing about them was the weird advertisement panel they put near the tables, alluding to the volcanic origin of the island: 'If Tenerife will be another Pompeii wouldn't you like to be discovered by future archaeologists with these beautiful handmade flowery jewels hanging on you?'

These days I put on one of the two sets we bought from them and

I'm determined to wear it till my last breath. It definitely makes
and will make a difference in this world of dust...

10

Christmas, again. They came all over here. All the family. Awkward. We all tried to look relaxed. Of course we were not. I didn't want they see me as the crumbling being I became, I cannot stand the pity people feel for me. They know how I think and this increases the tension. Almost everyone was looking forward for the moment of leaving, and this burdened us with a sense of guilt.

The lack of any Christmas decoration made the things worse. I begged Romeo for skipping the usual (cheerful) hustle of the season and spare me the string of carols. I am in no mood to see and hear to the well known pageantry or to join in the reenacting of a cheesy bliss. Santa Claus, I'm not at home for you! Yes, I still have a dream, crippled as it is, and I don't need a surrogate. Now, I see clearly the beautiful lies which are building our confidence

and optimism. If someone created this world of ours, that being definitely had the typical profile of a politician. No wonder who is ruling the world. The exceptions only make bitterer the pattern.

Romeo's mother brought me a sweater made by herself, orange-white chequered. She talked incessantly, probably fearing any moment of silence could turn the suppressed words and feelings to the surface. My father-in-law stood upright in a corner, on the spot where in previous years the Christmas tree was put, nodding to her wife's rattle as if counting the words per minute.

Anthony, the sworn bachelor, tried a couple of lame jokes. He was, in spite of all self-constraint, visible nervous. He made use of his inveterate smoking habit to stay out of room as much as he could. When in, he avoided, except a glance now and then, to look at me. Once, our eyes met, and I could see that his were as if he had cried. Well, it is an uneasy history, of an unrequited love and of a challenging test for brotherly ties. I'm not sure that he really accepted me as Romeo's wife, but he managed to act as if he was unconditionally happy for us.

Ofelia has nothing to give you a clue she's Romeo's and Anthony's sister. She is always wax pale, even in the hot of the summer or in the biting frost. She's only 62 inches and looks very fragile and helpless. This is only the facade - you could hardly find a tougher woman, physically and psychic resilient. When every one else was concerned that she would commit suicide or turn insane, she overcame the death of her fiancé, casual victim to a gun mayhem in Baltimore. Her daughter has the light blue eyes of her father, anything else is the replica of her mother. She's a sweet little thing, she's five now, and she's the one who never fails in eliciting my bright smile. She fixed me with her extraordinary sharp eyes. If anyone else would have done it, I would have been embarrassed or angry. Not with her. She seemed to absorb all the information she could spot in the room, scanning and working it out. I wondered what was going on in that doll head. Elisa has a powerful imagination, a bent toward reshaping the reality into a sort of parallel universe. I often listened mesmerized to her short stories, where her plush toys are acting as in cartoons and real people are toys, robots or aliens. She likes

mystery, intricate plots, twisted outcomes. I don't know -she circumvented my curiosity- if dreams have any role in her creations. Even if they have, Elisa isn't a daydreamer. Her stories are very carefully constructed, with an amazing baggage of details, casting light on a burgeoning analytical power. I am pretty convinced that she's cut for being a talented, successful writer.

As she sat quiet and eye inquisitive, I became curious what story she might draft, obviously with me as the main character. Instantly I was grateful to her, thinking that one day Elisa Zeffirelli (or maybe she will choose Hoffmann, her father's name, as pen name) will write about me, knowing that her words will be the fittest body for my departed soul.

Mom brought a plate of cookies, and Ofelia helped her with the coffee and the juice. The awkwardness made itself more acute - it wasn't the way a family should celebrate the Christmas. I was concerned only by the impression it made on Elisa, suddenly resenting me being so radical, so unthoughtful, so egocentric.

After all, if I was to die, why was so important to me to brush off everything that did not fit with my mood of a dying person? Couldn't I bear the full bitterness allotted to me, just for the sake of a child who does not have to load her memory with a thick layered sadness? The only thing that reminded the Christmas, except the dull greetings, was the gift I wanted Romeo to buy for Elisa. It is a tablet, on which she could read stories (she already knows the alphabet) and watch movies (Romeo packed the device with the best stuff for kids) and on which she might, why not, begin her writer career. There was a sparkle in her eye when unboxing, gave a barely perceptible sigh, then along with a fleeting glance to me and Romeo said a simple and stressed *thank you*. After a short moment she raised her head looking in my direction - *I too have a gift for you, Auntie. But I heard Mom saying you don't want gifts this year; so I keep it for the next Christmas.* It was stone silence. Anthony left the room, Romeo turned his face to the window behind him, Ofelia put her hands on Elisa's shoulders, my father-in-law lowered his head and fumbled with the fingers some imaginary objects, my mother-in-

law and my mom poured more coffee and juice. I stood upright in bed and, looking straight in Elisa's eyes - *I didn't know you had a gift for me, you little Santa! I'll be glad to have it. Don't forget to bring it tomorrow. I mean it!* She nodded and pursued to tinker with the tablet. Somehow, I saved half of the day.

Finally, they left. Romeo accompanied them. I was slowly laying me in bed, tired, eyes closed, a mix of thoughts under the grinder of fatigue. The door opened with a bang, I was startled - Elisa stormed into the room, made a brisk halt close to me, put her tiny hand on my cheek and asked as stormily as she entered the room: *You are not going to die, are you?* I got instantly a big lump in my throat and felt a surge of tears ready to spill over my face. *You stupid*, I said to me, *dare not a single tear to come in your eyes!* I managed to keep my face straight and even forced a smile, holding gentle her hand on my face - *No, sweetie, I'm not going to die* (that moment I really believed the words, and that gave me some relief, because I was not lying to Elisa). *I love you so much, Aunt Julia!* And, stormily again, gave me a hug, pressing her soft,

sweet smelling cheek against mine. It was like an unexpected springtime disheveling the winter, a flood of life shivering all of me. *I love you too, my little angel,* kissed her silky curls, let myself immerse in her light blue eyes - and out she was. I looked toward the closed door, the smile recessed, I was trembling with cold, and could not stop from whining and quietly crying, feeling so stupid and angry.

11

Would have been better if I had a child? Would have it made a difference for my peace of mind, of soul? I could have had a child the age of Elisa. Sometimes, I think of her as of my own child. The pain to left her 'behind' gives me a clue of what I'd have felt if she were my daughter for real. I and Romeo talked a lot about having children. We advanced names, weighed if we wanted more than one child. For the moment, we decided to have only one and kept open our options for the future. I was thrilled trying to fancy how she or he would look like, the clothes we would buy, the landmarks of her/his life - the first words, the first independent walk, the first drawings, the first book read, riding a

bike, ice skating, swimming... All our three members family's history recorded on photos and videos, multiplying the heap of personal sources for the use of rebuilding sometime in the far future the conceited saga of 21st century.

We talked, considered, fantasized, and stopped short before acting. Until it was too late. Still, I'm not certain that we have to regret, but I'm positive about not to regret up to the point of self reproach. The joy you have for a newborn child is something outside the boundaries of a definition. True, we are spellbound by a vital, primary instinct of preserving the species, independent of conscience. However, our rejoice in having kids is independent all the same from that urge. So, I'm not linking the desired child to the idea of immortality through offspring. Because I do not see any trace of immortality. It follows that we don't have a 'duty' to perpetuate, but we can't stop to delight in the fact of life as a birth, renewal, freshness. All the ideologies forced upon us through centuries in order ('order' is on its own right here) to shame us if we didn't f** for the sake, glory of the community bereave us from the profound, beyond any immediate usefulness,

joy of life. Enjoying life should be as the art for the sake of art.

I know, I would appear ridiculous or offensive to many people, but why would I care? There is a monstrous amount of trash and trashing in what human mind brings forth (indeed, Moronia or Moronesia would be a more proper name for this planet), that defying it might be ridiculous or offensive, but not discouraging. With whom am I fighting? Nobody is intended to read this stuff. I'm confined in this room, detained by some absurd, arbitrary circumstances or fate, I'm functioning almost in an 'airplane mode', probably I am to live no more than a year, and I'm still at swords' point - again, with whom and for what?

A child... It is on the top of a list of what I will miss by an early death. There is no comfort in reading a letter of Paul Fleming, who was trying to give solace to a friend who lost his son in the middle of the Thirty Years War: in so terrible times the dead are not to be mourned, only the newborns. It implied the bitterness over the failure of the mankind and the logical conclusion - it is irresponsible to bring new human life, let's stop it here. True,

when you look around you'll have a lot of reasons to be loath to boost further generation. But life is above all complaints, melancholy, disgusted philosophy. Life is all over the place, swelling through misery and bare land, showing no mercy for the individuals building its powerful cohorts. I'm one of them, struggling not to be shed, gasping out of breath when thinking to the unborn child who would have replaced me.

I will miss a child because I missed the opportunity to have one. How many other opportunities have I missed? Had been Romeo an opportunity or just the way it had to be? How would I know for sure what did I right, what did I from my free will and what not? And why am I so silly rolling and rolling on the rollercoaster of all these questions? Nothing will be changed by tormenting myself with images of a would-be mother. The only good thing I can do now is to pour my entire love over Romeo. Maybe not all my love - how would he handle the pain of being forever separated? Maybe (why didn't I realized till now?!) I have to show, to fake a cold side, indifference. It could be understood as byproduct of the disease, but it will not fail in easing off the

emotional aftermath. Is it what is called self-sacrificing love? I'm not certain I can do it. I need to think it over.

It would be better/worse to make a false confession about a past, short flirtation with Anthony, even a kiss...

Oh no, I can't believe I'm thinking of such a pathetic scheme for soothing Romeo's wounds. He will know it's a lie, he'll know what is going on in my soul, and his suffering will grow. Maybe the simple fact of watching my physical decay, becoming more and more an useless object, like an old piece of furniture hosting bugs, will reduce love to compassion and attending duty. I am teared apart by the prospect of our love being trampled by an absurd sickness and by the image of an widowed, lingering Romeo. There is no way out. It is a black hole. Whatever I'm trying, it will not tame it. Pinned to my bed, I'm left to myself, contemplating it, as Stephen Hawking does pinned in his chair.

Ofelia and Elisa came over. The child brought me the promised gift. It is a colorful, glittery collage: two women, under them, in

clumsy cut letters, two names - 'Mommy' and 'Aunt Julia'. A little girl is handing them a halved heart.

12

I was seven or eight years when the reality of death made a lasting impression on me. It may be said that it was my first real encounter with death. I was spending the summer with Old Granny. One day she brought me to one of her friends, Mrs. Balaban. I knew her well, she and her husband had adopted a boy about my age, Sammy, with whom I sometimes played. We shared the first 'erotical' experience, impersonating some movie characters, and in the climax scene Sammy was leaning over me and placed a passionate kiss on my lips. In the other room were his parents with Old Granny, chatting over a glass of lemonade and a saucer of mulberry jam. As soon as they caught sight of our drama, they called on us to come near them. We feared to be

brushed down, but we were befuddled arriving in the middle of a loud laughter.

Mrs.Balaban was a lively, talkative person, the rosy cheeks being the flag of her personality and, as doctors keep reassuring us, a sign of health. Now, as I entered the bedroom, I was shocked seeing her laying under a blanket in the middle of a hot summer (later I learned of the, more familiar for flu as for cancer, chills and fits she had, as the likes I have now the benefit of exclusivity to experience); shocked to see her wax pale, haggard, with dark circles and bags under eyes. She barely spoke, grasping for air, too tired to shed tears. Later in life, images like this, icons of human suffering, became familiar to me, a staple of history and civilization. I have grown almost immune to them, doing charity acts as a mere duty, empathy downgraded to a routine. Life is so richly spread with the tragic ingredient that our taste of it is fading. Apparently, the Earth is engulfed in sadness, but a defensive system is also at work, keeping us afloat and the most of us away from the suicide option. Life appears to me as a blind avenue, not being sure if someone or something is responsible for

it.

Mrs.Balaban was glad to see me, although she did not approve Old Granny's decision to bring me there. *You shouldn't have come Julia, I look awful, it's not good for you to see me like this.* And, after a short break (every word had to be fueled with a reduced supply of energy, her body running fast out of it) - *Luigia, take the child away.* Old Granny mumbled something and took me to Sammy's room. I don't remember what we said to each other, all I know is that he was sternly dignified, seeming all of a sudden older than me and, ironically, protective, instead to ask for protection.

In the following years we rarely met. Mr.Balaban remarried, and Old Granny visited only Mrs.Balaban's graveyard.

Later, I learned from the news that Sammy had broken new ground in the field of cancer research. I knew that his career as a doctor had begun in the days when his mother suffered that terrible illness.

When myself have been diagnosed with neurofibromatosis, Sammy instantly came to my mind, searched the Internet for his

clinic, thinking of healing with the confidence toward mending some damaged car. Then I came to my senses and the euphoria of 'Where's a will, there's a way' fizzled out. I'm not the beauty from some fairy tale, poisoned by an evil character and fallen in a sleep edging the death, miraculously saved by the Charming Prince. Nevertheless, I couldn't wave off the wishful happy end, framed in the scene of Sammy leaning, after the successful surgery, over my bed and kissing me on the forehead.

I didn't call him, and firmly forbid Romeo to contact him or to bring up the subject ever. He might be a very good surgeon and a researcher, but in my case the success had from the beginning a tiny chance (if any). I didn't want to watch him fail and painfully, even with a sense of guilt, refresh his memory with the mournful days we shared in the near of his mother.

And, again, he or anyone else couldn't save me. There are limits which we aren't able to push further. Extended from education to other areas, the action pattern 'No child left behind' is one more proof of the lack of realism people are bountifully, self-complacently showing. 'Behind'? As if we all were an army

marshalled for an infallible attack and should keep every individual on the standardized line of success. These great expectations, under the boasting badge of courage, smack of Kafkian castles & trials, with absurdity replacing logic and common sense.

Every day I gain in resignation, accepting the fact of an early, non-sense death as a matter-of-fact event, done by 'the hand of fate'. It ought to make me somehow comfortable, waiting patiently, as I did so many times in line at the airport, for the last travel. But it does not. Checking the lesson of limits as learned doesn't make my will a convert for checking unconditionally out. I turned into a place of fierce confrontation between fire and water, trivially matching the treadmill of alternating feverish days with exhausted ones. The anger was not been curbed, it is more than ever present, less vociferous, but more determined, steeled for the final, decisive battle. The more my physical strength is leaking, the more my will to survive is stronger. And the supply appears to be infinite.

I remember the funeral day of Mrs.Balaban. It was a brilliant sunny day, nature and people were swimming in an oily, glaring light. People traded in soft voices the humble wisdom appropriate for such occasions : *What a beautiful day! It is a sure sign of the presence of Grace; Yes, Mrs.Balaban's soul is in good hands.* I didn't understand what backed up those words, but it looked to me that Mrs.Balaban is gone somewhere, well and fine. If really this was the case, it remained a mystery her being put in a box of wood and lowered in a hole. I asked Old Granny, *Why is Mrs.Balaban laying there like the doll Santa Claus left for me last time under the Christmas tree?* Old Granny gentle, but resolutely, hushed me. A nearby stander hurried to enlighten me: *Mrs.Balaban will lay under the Tree of Life, in the Garden of God.* I was more confused than edified. With all my education, classical studies and social experience, I am pretty much in the same state of mind.

13

A dream is visiting me again and again. I am alone on a rock island, around me the mass of waters. Nothing else is to be seen. It is no day or night. A pale light and a light gray are a continuous present. They are reflected, in myriad mild and ephemeral flashes by the dark mirror of the ocean. All I hear is the rippling of it. I know that no one is alive on Earth, a name almost without meaning, except the rough swath I sit on. I am left alone and stare in the monotonous infinite. If someone else would tell me this dream, I would expect to hear the endless cry called forth by the dreary solitude. In my dream I'm not crying. I'm perfectly harmonized with the surroundings, the last piece in the puzzle. It is unclear if I make a difference, the puzzle would probably be

the same without me. Yes, the world is the same every second, births and deaths are mere numbers. We are used to say, 'Nothing will be the same after...' or 'without...', but it always is something or someone filling the gap and draining the memory of the nostalgic footprints. Fighting against oblivion is part of our fear of and despair with decay and disappearance. A fight subdued by the recurrent, boisterous act of blowing up the bridges to the past. The zero-sum of the survival game is the blank solitude from my dream.

I have always liked solitude. To be with my thoughts, to have time to put things together or apart, trying patterns for understanding the world. That's why I spent so much time with books - I didn't shun people, books gave me the chance to meet more of them, hear to people from the past (no need of spiritism), traveling in time and space (no Sci Fi or visas implied). I did never see a book as a speaking dead, I felt like being part of it, it was another layer of the reality, not an imaginary world. A parallel one, but part of a single world. Imagination and intuition

are the backbone of reason, reason is their guardian (angel). Cooking is a good example (there are blogs about cuisine and recipes which are a literary, essayistic treat).

In his way, Romeo is also a solitary person. He's not fond of parties, has not what you call a best friend - he told me repeatedly, 'You are my best friend'. He likes to be, as a photographer, witness of its time, in the middle of the events, being especially fascinated by the crowds (otherwise avoiding, as much as possible, all sort of gathering). From Twitter-organized flash mobs to strikes and other forms of social unrest, he is eager to capture the speedy move of history, not to still, freeze it in 'illustrating', 'picturesque' pieces of the recent past, but to point to the hidden, underground movements. It's like taking pictures of a tsunami from inside. His leaning to solitude is guiding him toward the building drops of the wave.

And so we met, two persons jealous of their solitudes, building the wave for a private surf party. What is love? I don't know the right answer. If an alien were to go for an interview to get the job

of an undercover agent on Earth and one of the questions would be 'What is love?', what would the answer be? Anthologies will help, but in the end you'll be as lost as you have been before skimming through them. Historical and contemporary social studies ('study' is so far away from me, as a stage for a singer who lost voice) will increase the confusion. Romantic novels and movies are hugely popular, no matter the end, happy or tragic. The last one seems to be favored over the former, as an unconscious way, perhaps, of getting credits for personal luck in love. 'Titanic' sank for a second time in an ocean of tears, but out of the theatres the deep emotions showed to the screen aren't able to save legion of sinking relations. Really, I'm suspecting that's something wrong with all this display of feelings drifting on the canvas of 'love'. I'm suspecting that there is no much of it 'in the neighborhood', and I'm just staying inside my fence, on the island of shared solitude with Romeo, thinking of the definition of love while I happily live our own.

Happily? I am nailed in this room, sometimes I am brought to the

open window, sometimes in the garden for a few steps, I am carried like relics, with no pious public to attend. My biography is kind of an apocrypha, this is ok with me, not being in the canon, living on the edge of common wisdom, circumventing rules of conformity, not as hard as to be considered a maverick, but enough to be suspected of a secret 'apostasy'.

Happily? Solitude doesn't make happy. Solitude is the venue for your personal *Divine Comedy*, for the quest of yourself as a cosmic entity. Happiness is not what the glance into the Absolute conveys to you, you'll find happiness, yet no warranty for it, in the disjointed things life brings in your way. To me, love was the way itself, longing for an encounter, as sailors were looking, after months of solitude on the seemingly unbounded sea, for land -

Las Islas de la Felicidad.

Last night, Romeo made love to me. It sounds like he has prepared and served me with some exquisite dish. Making love is probably a mild, to civilization converted, reminiscence of cannibalism. Sadomasochists are sort of a sect closer to it. Cancer

is then a lovemaking of your cells gone wrong. Too much desire, passion. It is possible I have cancer because of my passionate, exceeding love? Is it really a silly question? Am I gone so unbalanced? Has my love grown, as the ancient Greeks had put it, into a hubris? Then why has not Romeo the same fate? Is he loving less? Aren't we soulmates, a disjointed solitude reunited? I'm angry with me, thinking of Romeo being not so passionately in love with me as I am with him. Especially after last night. We were so hungry of each other. Unfortunately, I am too weak to hunt my prey, so let me being hunted and eaten up. Even so, I was exhausted. Smooshed up by pain and fever, by desire and pleasure.

Solitude is dropping, drop by drop, out of me, hotter and hotter, while inside me is growing faster and faster.

14

I'm once more mama's little girl. I am depending on her constant help. All this time she was with me, cooked for me, dressed and undressed me, attended me in the bathroom, took care of strictly respecting the administration of pills. She's here when I'm plagued with the terrible pain, changes every fifteen minutes the compresses on my forehead when I'm knocked down by fever, holds me the basin when I throw up my bile, because I have nothing else to discharge and I feel like all my inside is a swelling nausea and with all my strength drained out I could plunge (and two or three times the possibility turned real) in the greenish-yellow pool.

She doesn't speak much, doesn't smile and I didn't see her crying

(what is so common with me that I fear I developed a mix of depression and hysteria). She practically moved to us, Romeo's time being tightly scheduled, so he can't be at home around the clock. He has already his big share of stress for my tortured nights. It is nothing I can do that will relieve them from the chores of attending a messy dying person. I should add, 'their beloved person'. This is exactly what makes the things worse. Love is a blessing and a curse. Without love you are a lonely rocky planet. Loving and beloved, you are trembling only to the idea to lose what you could regard as a gift of life. There is a lot of soul torsion streaming between us, but we keep quiet, in the vain hope that we can conceal our worries and sorrows and spare them to others. Either way, showing your soul naked, or bracing it with the armor of self-command, will have the same effect, of magnifying the tragic. The Greek catharsis is a big lie. There is no remedy to the tragedy of life. We can't change the conditions, the design - as a more palatable notion, which dooms us to be subatomic plots in an eternal tragedy. Neither the will to challenge our poor condition, as a stretching of the absurd to

battle our enslavement, can be changed.

I've been a stubborn from early childhood. I can see now that stubbornness came to a peak in this 'theory' of life. Bitterness over my present condition might sharpen it to the dignity of receiving the cup of poison in the manner of Socrates. But I'm not so calm, so aloof. I would really like to have a dispassionate eye-bird's view of the universe framing my spinning out life. I only can see a chaos, highways with all sort of rules, incompatible one with each other, crashes, jams and gridlocks. I am desperate with my confusion, with this whirling between the same uncertainties. Romeo used to be the staunch of all my doubts and anxieties. Now, he appears to be as clueless as I am, and for the first time I see him fragile, vulnerable. This is more scarring than death - losing the mainstay you had in person you love the most. Not that you'll trust less, but seeing the weakness of him, his need to feel protected too, and, finally, seeing that this is not a mere weakness, but a deadly one, Achilles' heel, makes you like being bereft of your last winning card.

As a child, I used to cry a lot, as a form of protest, accompanied by vigorous stamping of feet. I always wished to get my way and this character of mine clashed the more blatantly with my father's righteousness. Mom was the bumper between us and was the most affected. I thought her a weak person, incapable to stand her ground. I even despised her for the overall submissive attitude toward my father. An alliance against him seemed to me the natural thing to do, but I couldn't persuade her, although there were moments when she looked ready to do the 'big leap'. Perhaps I have exaggerated the tensions between my parents and oversimplified (grotesquely) their relation as a master-slave one. I looked at it only from my wide flung window with a view on life as a bright garden populated with burgeoning principles and ideals and innumerable tiny clones of the Statue of Liberty. My garden is still the same, only in full blossom, but my eyes learned the Chinese art of watching a landscape, by walking through the image of it, covering the distance with my ambulatory presence. My idea of freedom grew from a stern, warlike stance into a vast,

comprehensive phrase distributed in a file cabinet with links to the 'freedoms' of others.

In my first day at school, when Mrs. Poppins (how could I forget such a surname?) asked my name, I snapped a *Julia*, not bothering to stand up.

Julia who?

Montessori [grudgingly].

Ah, you are Italian.

No, I'm American. Do you think we live in Italy?

You are quite nervy, little lady.

I'm not a lady, neither I'm 'little'. And, why 'nervy'? Because I know the country I live in?

My parents were the first from our class to be called at school. I instantly gained the respect of my schoolmates, only to evaporate soon after, when Julia Montessori showed her true colors of a retreated in herself, few words child. Mom tried (her best, I would say now) to dissuade my father from an elaborate program to discipline (tame, as he liked to say) me. *If she's inclined to the*

laconism and rudeness of the Spartans, so let give her a Spartan education. He never really followed the method (or any other one), because he never considered education a matter beyond the millennial tradition of mechanical reproduction of an authoritative family scheme.

It's all in the past now. Mom is a 'vestige' from that era. Her silence, her never speaking about my father, not even once mentioning his name after he died, is her way to make up for the years of self-denying. The name of my father was erased from her ID acts - she returned to her maiden name, I suspect that she erased from her memory too. I became a Zeffirelli, and so our family history is purged like a body from its tumor. Epilogue: nothing is lost, everything is transformed - a tumor is ravaging my body.

15

Romeo told me that my publisher is intending to print a second edition of *Mind and Body in Ancient Greece*. I should to be happy, to be proud - my work is successful, I left my small, but significant mark, on the cultural history. My name will figure in future bibliographies and specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias. I have done something, I am somebody. I may rest in peace!

No. No, no, no. I am estranged from my previous academic activity, a second edition of my book is a bad joke, is a mockery to what my mind and body are experiencing. If I had to say if the illness had done something good to me, then there would be the

falling of all sort of masks and roles which accompanied my career and built up my Weltanschauung. I don't know what exactly I would do with my life if a miracle would happen and I could start afresh. Maybe I'll try freelance writing - this uncommitted and disorderly jotting gave me a taste for storytelling, could be an excuse, kind of a testament from the life before the disease passed down to my new life. I could travel together with Romeo, teaming up for good reporting.

Yes, in that new life Romeo will be more than ever present, 24/7. Not the fact that I am married to him is so important to me, but the love connection that is 'evergreen' and stronger, killing any virus of boredom.

I still have a dream, haven't I? A bittersweet smile is hanging on my lips and drops like a caterpillar from a tree, disappearing in the white of the paper, in nothingness. Hello, my world of here and now, I'm awakened, ready for the pain and sorrow (what a successful company!). The act of writing has turned into a difficult task, sometimes a sour one. I'm on the last line of

resistance, the last inner wall, on the acropolis. I still have a dream, I still might bounce back into the 'normal' life. No, into the wonderful life with Romeo. And have kids, full of joy of life, and telling to their kids the story, the love story of Romeo and Julia... I'm laughing now, I must have lost my mind.

Romeo has been offered a place in a team of special reporters to cover the revolutionary events in Egypt. He is excited, but doesn't want to be so far from me. I persuaded him to accept, it is only a week (half of it I will know nothing, except high fever with delirium, and nausea and throwing up). He reluctantly gave up. I said I am glad to know that he will be again in a hot spot of fighting for freedom. We know very well that between the abstract 'freedom' and the historical shapes of it is a large gap, but the very moment of fighting for it is fascinating with the passion, powerful ideals and the great tragic poetry of self-sacrifice. I can see the Egyptians climbing the Great Pyramid and en chaining the symbol of pharaonic tyranny with a huge banner with 'Liberty' on it. I can see the Greeks remembering the glory of Thermopylae,

the sober glory written on the statue of king Leonidas, pouring out into the streets to the tune of 'Zorbas'. I can see... I better stop here, what I'm pretending to see are cartoon like fairy tales, where the good is so clearly separated from the evil and the happy end is just a matter of time (wrong stated, fairy tales are timeless, and that's the reason I'll hardly get the luck of a fairy tale character - I'm in the kingdom of Time).

16

'Freelance photographer Romeo Zeffirelli died from stranded bullets while covering the recent political violences in Cairo'

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I'd have to write it on an on, until my hand can't do it any more, until I can understand the meaning of the words or until I don't care of their meaning.

Noooooooooooo! I'm not done yet, I will no more cry, no, my good Old Granny, I won't cry. But I will live, I'll fight for every breath, I'm only a hunch of raw life instinct, I will live, in spite of all odds, doctors' judgment and I don't know what fate. I'll fight for life with all my love set on fire, I'll keep the life throbbing, with the passion of a tribal drummer, throbbing with the intensity of two hearts, one of them stopped in the Tahrir Square.

Watched a TV program about a little girl born without limbs. No hands, no legs. She looked so happy, smile all over the face, loud laughing. She even jumped in the swimming pool and managed to stay afloat.

My hope is like this little girl. It has no limbs. But it's swimming in the ocean of life, playfully drawing foaming traces, as the ones left by airplanes at an air show:

The End

